

Restocking System Using A Carousel

[0001] This application is a divisional of U.S. application serial no. 09/998,488 filed November 30, 2001 and titled Carousel Product For Use In Integrated Restocking And Dispensing System.

Background of the Invention

Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention is directed to a carousel product which can be used in a variety of ways to dispense and improve a restocking process, and can be used for a wide variety of associated tasks, e.g. inventory control, crediting returns, cycle counts, and the like.

Description of the Background

[0003] Medical facilities, such as hospitals, nursing homes, etc. have a centralized location such as a pharmacy department or materials management department within the facility to coordinate the dispensing of drugs or medical supplies to the patients of the medical facility. The departments utilizing medications and medical supplies in such facilities have long been burdened with the increasingly complex record keeping and inventory management that results from caring for hundreds, if not thousands, of patients every day. Various methods have been employed to assist a centralized pharmacy or other centralized medical supply departments with maintaining accurate records while attempting to reduce the burden of managing all of the information associated with the distribution of medications and medical supplies. The responsibilities of the centralized supply include: filling individual patient prescriptions on a daily basis; administration of drugs using the five rights: right drug, right patient, right dose, right time and right route, dispensing medical supplies to patients; maintaining sufficient inventory of each drug or medical

supply so as to have sufficient quantities on hand to administer to patients on a daily basis; tracking of drug interactions to prevent a patient from being given a drug that has adverse affects when combined with other drugs; accounting for the purchase of medications and medical supplies for use in the facility; accounting associated with dispensing of medications and medical supplies to individual patients; tracking of medication expiration dates to rid inventories of expired medications; and tracking of drug lot numbers, for example, in the event of a recall of a particular drug or drug lot number.

[0004] Medical facilities will dispense medications in one of three modes: centralized, decentralized, or a hybrid of partial decentralization. In facilities that are partly or fully decentralized, a very important function of the centralized pharmacy or materials management department is to restock various inventory locations, e.g. nurses stations, unit-based cabinets, satellite pharmacies, or off-site facilities in a network, with the quantity and types of medications and medical supplies that must be dispensed by the decentralized locations on a daily basis.

[0005] The need for storage locations in medical facilities remote from the centralized storage location stems from the need to be able to quickly and conveniently dispense medications and medical supplies (whether controlled or uncontrolled) to patients. To be able to dispense, there must be adequate supplies of the medications and medical supplies in the remote storage locations. To maintain the proper level of medications and medical supplies, accurate inventory control is necessary. Barring access to controlled substances by unauthorized personnel is also a necessary feature. The contents of these storage locations varies depending upon the medical procedures practiced in the area where the storage location is situated. For example, a storage location near an emergency room will be stocked differently than a storage location next to a surgical suite. Nevertheless, it is important to provide adequate supplies of all the required medications and medical supplies. It is also necessary to ensure that sufficient supplies are maintained at the decentralized and centralized storage locations without overstocking, because overstocking increases the cost of inventory by requiring more items to be maintained in inventory than are actually needed. Overstocking of inventory can also result in waste through spoilage

of unused supplies. Excessive restocking of locations is also demanding on the facility's staff who must devote more of their time to monitor the storage locations to ensure that sufficient supplies are available.

[0006] A variety of systems have been developed to restock storage locations or to fill patient medication/supply orders. In one such system, referred to as a "cart exchange" system, dispensing carts distributed at dispensing locations in a medical facility are periodically exchanged with fully supplied carts. These carts contain medications which satisfy the patients' current medications orders. The "used" cart is returned to the central supply area where inventory decreases of particular medications or medical supplies are recorded and the cart is restocked to predetermined "par" levels. These par levels are intended to ensure constant availability of required medications or medical supplies.

[0007] In a similar system, individual carts are used but are not removed from their dispensing locations in the medical facility. Instead, a larger cart holding a variety of medications and medical supplies is circulated throughout the facility to restock individual carts to their par levels.

[0008] Although these systems are generally effective in restocking locations, they suffer from a number of drawbacks. One particular drawback is the potential for stock-outs that can arise if the inventories of the carts are not closely monitored. Adequate inventory monitoring can be problematic due to time limitations on the staff. Depletion of certain items from the carts can pose serious risks to the patients in the medical facility. Another drawback is that restocking storage locations is a very labor-intensive and inefficient process, especially when accurate inventory levels are not maintained in the centralized or decentralized location. Sites with decentralized locations usually have many different locations, each of which is individually restocked.

[0009] More recently, storage areas are being provided with dispensing carts or cabinets having computer processors for recording removal of medications or medical supplies from the dispensing cabinets. These carts or cabinets commonly include locked drawers having locked medication receptacles, and include computers. The computers commonly provide for limited access by selected medical personnel to

such carts and cabinets and limited access to specific drawers or locations therein in response to entry of information into the computer. The computer creates inventory information for use by medical staff to ensure the continuity of the inventory in the carts or cabinets.

[0010] A system for restocking such computer controlled carts and cabinets is entitled Automated Restocking of Distributed Medication Dispensing Cabinets Using An Automated Medication Dispensing System, disclosed in U.S. application no. 09/480,819 and assigned to the same assignee as the present invention. The disclosed system automatically fills restock packages based on inventory information or configuration changes provided by various carts and cabinets located at the decentralized storage locations. The system encodes or otherwise disposes on the restock package an information carrier containing identifying information. To restock a dispensing cart or cabinet, a staff member decodes the information carrier encoded on the restock package. That may be accomplished by scanning a bar code or manually entering information into the cart's or cabinet's computer. Once the cart or cabinet confirms that the restock package is intended for it, the staff member loads the contents of the restock package into the cart or cabinet.

[0011] While the system of U.S. application no. 09/480,819 offers substantial advantages over other systems, some facilities may not have the resources to convert to such an automated system. Further, the facility may have the need to restock items which cannot be easily placed into a restocking package by automated equipment because of their size, weight, or configuration. Still other items may come from their manufacturers in bulk quantities or other types of packaging that make it difficult to automatically load them into a restocking package. Thus, the need exists for a restocking system that is at least in part manual, while taking advantage of the data generated by computer controlled carts and computer controlled cabinets. The need also exists for a restocking system that is at least in part manual, but can work side by side with computer automated restocking systems.

Summary of the Present Invention

[0012] The present invention is directed to a carousel (a type of automation device) used for distributing medications and medical supplies to patients (including, but not limited to, cart fill, first dose, “Stat” doses, and “Now” doses), distributing medications and medical supplies from centralized inventory locations to decentralized inventory locations, restocking of decentralized medication locations (including but not limited to unit-based cabinets, satellite pharmacies, and remote facilities in a network), out of stock processing for medication or supply cabinets, nurse refill requests, and other associated tasks. Additionally, the carousel system may be used for the ordering and receipt of medications and medical supplies from distributors and the tracking of inventory related to those activities.

[0013] The carousel is comprised of a drive track. A plurality of bins are arranged into rows, with the rows being driven by said drive track. A drive mechanism, e.g. an electric motor, drives the drive track. A sensor is provided to sense the position of the rows of bins. A processor is responsive to the sensor and data representative of a plurality of “picks” (i.e. removal of items) for more than one order for controlling the drive mechanism. By combining picks from different orders into a batch, the time spent driving the rows and time between picks is minimized. The carousel may be divided into a plurality of columns, each with its own drive track, drive mechanism, and sensor, to enable several rows to be brought into a pick position simultaneously.

[0014] The present invention is also directed to a variety of methods. In one method, a bar code on an open shelving unit is scanned with a hand-held device (wireless or connected). The quantity of items requested is input through the hand held device for the scanned bar code. The bar code and quantity information are down loaded from the hand-held device and the information is queued in a restocking device such as the previously described carousel.

[0015] In another method, an order to be filled is displayed at a workstation. The order is initiated with a hand-held device (wireless or connected). The order is manually filled. The final step is to indicate through the hand-held device that the order is filled so that another order, if any, can be initiated without traveling to the workstation.

[0016] In another method, a restocking package is created from items held in a carousel in a centralized storage location. The restocking package is delivered to a location so that the location may be restocked with items from the restocking package.

[0017] In another method, a restocking package is filled with items in a centralized storage location. The restocking package is delivered to another location. The restocking package is either inserted into a specified location in a dispensing device or connected to the dispensing device.

[0018] The apparatus and methods of the present invention provide a number of advantages in dispensing items from decentralized storage locations and restocking the decentralized storage locations from a centralized storage location. Those, and other advantages and benefits will become apparent from the Description of the Preferred Embodiments herein below.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0019] For the present invention to be easily understood and readily practiced, the present invention will now be described, for purposes of illustration and not limitation, in conjunction with the following figures, wherein:

[0020] FIG. 1 is a diagram illustrating the relationship between a centralized storage location and, among other things, a plurality of storage locations;

[0021] FIG. 2 is a diagram illustrating a process for distributing items and restocking of items based, at least in part, on records created during distribution;

[0022] FIG. 3 is one example of hardware located at a decentralized location implementing a closed system for performing dispensing operations;

[0023] FIG. 4 is one example of hardware located at a decentralized location implementing an open system for performing dispensing operations;

[0024] FIG. 5 is one example of hardware located at the central location for enabling the manual assembly of restocking packages based on data generated by the hardware of FIG. 3 or FIG. 4;

[0025] FIGs. 5A and 5B illustrate embodiments of an order assembly table;

[0026] FIG. 6 illustrates two carousels and a workstation for implementing advanced queue processing;

[0027] FIG. 7 is a diagram illustrating the order grouping feature of the present invention;

[0028] FIG. 8 is a flow chart illustrating the steps carried out by a processor controlling the carousel to process restocking orders in a batch mode;

[0029] FIG. 9 is another example of hardware located at the central location for enabling the manual assembly of restocking packages based on data generated by the hardware of FIG. 3 or FIG. 4;

[0030] FIG. 10 is a diagram illustrating the flow of information between the computers used at various locations within a dispensing/restocking system; and

[0031] FIG. 11 illustrates a tote which may be used as a restocking package.

[0032] The specification includes an appendix which includes eight pages of flow charts illustrating the process flow for various functions of the carousel of the present invention, a one page chart illustrating a patient fill process performed by an automation device such as a robot, and a one page chart illustrating a cabinet fill process performed by an automation device such as a robot. The processes are implemented in the presently preferred embodiment by software, stored in any appropriate memory device, which is executed by a computer.

Description of the Preferred Embodiments

[0033] FIG. 1 is a diagram illustrating the relationship between a centralized storage location 10 and various inventory destinations, including a plurality of decentralized storage locations 12-1, 12-2 through 12-n, patients 13, and a remote facility 14. Each of the decentralized storage locations 12-1 through 12-n is capable of dispensing items stored at the location. The items may include medications,

controlled medical supplies, medical supplies or items of a nature consistent with the facility in which the system illustrated in FIG. 1 is located. Items may be dispensed directly from centralized storage location 10 to patients 13, or from the centralized storage location 10 to a remote facility 14. Data typically flows from the decentralized storage locations 12-1 through 12-n to the centralized storage location 10. In response to that data, items are typically moved from the central storage location 10 to the decentralized storage locations 12-1 through 12-n or to the remote facility 14 to restock such locations to either replenish dispensed items or to stock new items. Decentralized locations could include satellite pharmacies, computerized medication cabinets, stationary/mobile medication carts, nurse servers, remote hospital pharmacies, supply closets, supply cabinets, etc. Supplies can be reordered from distributors based on levels of stock in the centralized storage location 10.

[0034] FIG. 2 illustrates a process which may begin with a step of dispensing an item at step 16 from one of the decentralized storage locations 12-1 to a patient. A dispensing operation may occur in a variety of ways. In a medical facility, dispenses may be completed from medication orders or they may be completed from inventory lists, to name a few types of dispensing operations. Assuming a medication has been dispensed from decentralized storage location 12-1, the medication may either be administered to a patient or returned as shown by step 18. Medications may be returned for a variety of reasons such as the patient has checked out, been moved, or the patient's medication may have been changed. Medications may be returned to the decentralized storage location 12-1. Certain types of medications may simply be replaced in the decentralized storage location 12-1 so as to be used in another dispensing operation, or may need to be disposed of.

[0035] The administration of medications occurring at step 18 may be carried out through the use of a hand-held device such as an AcuScan-Rx™ device available from McKesson Automation, Inc., 700 Waterfront Drive, Pittsburgh, PA. Such devices are wireless devices which communicate with a database to verify the administration of medications to patients. Such communications enable the maintenance of a database of inventory levels as shown by step 20. The database and associated computer system for maintaining the database of inventory levels may be

located at the centralized storage location 10 or may be located remote therefrom. In either event, the computer system necessary for maintaining the database provides information which enables the centralized storage location 10 to perform step 22 of generating a restocking package. As will be described in greater detail below, the generation of the restocking package may be done completely automatically, manually, or through some combination of manual and automatic processes. The restocking package is used to restock the decentralized storage location 12-1.

[0036] Restocking packages may also be generated at centralized location 10 and delivered to the remote facility 14. From facility 14 an item may be transferred as shown by step 24. The transfer may be a dispensing step for a patient or a transfer to another location. Items may also be dispensed directly to the patient from the centralized location 10.

[0037] FIG. 3 illustrates one example of hardware which may be located at any of the decentralized locations 12-1 through 12-n. The hardware illustrated in FIG. 3 is comprised of an AcuDose-Rx™ cabinet 26, having a control computer 32, and an AcuDose-Rx™ auxiliary cabinet 28, available from McKesson Automation, Inc. A supply tower 30 is also illustrated. The control computer 32 controls the operation of the cabinet 26, auxiliary cabinet 28, and supply tower 30. The control computer 32 is also in communication with the central database.

[0038] To perform a dispensing operation a user logs onto the control computer 32. Based on the user's information, various drawers 31 in the cabinet 26 and the auxiliary cabinet 28, and various doors 33 on the supply tower 30 are unlocked. Thereafter, patient information and information regarding items to be dispensed is entered. The items to be dispensed may include medications or medical supplies. After the item to be dispensed has been removed, its removal is recorded at the control computer 32. The user may continue to dispense items for the identified patient, or patient information for another patient may be entered. Entry of information, including log-in, can be performed in a variety of ways, e.g., through entry with a keypad, barcode scanning, selecting items from a pick list, RF ID, flash memory, magnetic strips, OCR, etc. Note that computerized medication cabinets like the AcuDose-Rx cabinet can also track medications or supplies that are not stored in

the cabinets 26, 28 or tower 30. For example, the control computer 32 can track virtual inventories, i.e., medications stored outside the cabinets 26, 28 or tower 30. Examples include medications stored in a refrigerator whose inventory and transactions are recorded by the control computer 32. The reader will understand that the hardware illustrated in FIG. 3 is exemplary and is illustrated for purposes of demonstrating one type of hardware which may be located at the decentralized storage locations 12-1 through 12-n.

[0039] The hardware illustrated in FIG. 3 limits access to the items to be dispensed to those individuals who have properly logged on. Thus, the hardware illustrated in FIG. 3 is referred to as a closed system for performing dispensing operations because a dispensing operation cannot be performed unless the user is identified to, and recognized by, the control computer 32.

[0040] FIG. 4 illustrates another example of hardware which may be located at any of the decentralized storage locations 12-1 through 12-n. The hardware is comprised of a first shelving unit 34 and a second shelving unit 36. An optional interface computer 38 may be provided, which is in communication with the database. If the interface computer 38 is not provided, a handheld device 40 can be carried into the area to perform the inventory of the shelves. The handheld device 40 is taken back to the centralized storage location 10 where the information is downloaded in any appropriate manner. Alternatively, the hand-held device 40 could be a wireless device communicating over a wireless network link. Alternatively, and as shown in FIG. 4, the hand-held device 40 may be located in the area and have a docking cradle 41 in communication with the interface computer 38.

[0041] Each of the shelving units 34, 36 is comprised of a plurality of bins 42. Each of the bins carries indicia 44 which may be, for example, a barcode and/or a label identifying the contents of the bin. Additionally, items in the bins may have a bar code, label or other indicia directly on them or on their packaging. The bar code could be scanned, or other methods of inputting the data consistent with the type of indicia used, or push buttons or the like actuated, to perform a dispensing or other type of operation. In addition, the handheld device 40 could be used to generate an ad hoc order through its screen entry in the event that an item is not available to be

scanned or otherwise have data pertinent thereto input. The number of shelving units 34, 36 and the configuration of the bins 42, depends upon the number and size of the items to be stocked. Because access to the bins 42 is not restricted, the hardware illustrated in FIG. 4 is referred to as an open system for performing dispensing operations. The reader will understand that the hardware illustrated in FIG. 4 is exemplary and is illustrated for purposes of demonstrating one type of hardware which may be located at the decentralized storage locations 12-1 through 12-n.

[0042] The hand-held device 40 may be a wireless scanning device such as a Symbol 7240 or Welch Allyn 7400. In one mode of operation, the operator may use the hand-held device 40 to scan the barcode indicia 44 for each bin for which a restock is desired. The operator will then input the order quantity on the hand-held device 40. When the hand-held device 40 is docked in its cradle 41, the data will be downloaded. The data will then be queued to be processed to generate a restocking package. Use of the hand-held device 40 eliminates the manual task of ordering items to be restocked, and reduces the potential for errors.

[0043] FIG. 5 illustrates one example of hardware located at the central location 10 for enabling the manual assembly of a restocking package based on data generated by the hardware illustrated in FIGS. 3 and 4. FIG. 5 illustrates a carousel 46 comprised of a plurality of bins 48 arranged in a plurality of rows 50. The rows 50 of bins 48 are connected to a drive track 52, which may be, for example, a pair of endless belts or chains. The rows 50 of bins 48 are connected to the drive track 52 through a swivel connection 54 which enables the rows 50 of bins 48 to maintain a horizontal position as the rows 50 are driven by the drive track 52. Each of the bins 48 carries indicia 55, which may be, for example, a barcode and/or a label indicating the contents of the bin, similar to indicia 44 in FIG. 4.

[0044] The drive track 52 is driven by, for example, an electric motor 56. The electric motor 56 may drive the drive track through one or more drive gears 58 in the case of a chain type of drive track or through a pulley in the case of a belt type of drive track. In addition to use of an electric motor 56, hydraulics or any other appropriate mechanism for driving the drive track 52 may be used. A sensor 60 may be provided to sense the position of the rows 50 of bins 48. Alternatively, a shaft

encoder may be provided for motor 56 for keeping track of the degree of rotation of the motor's 56 shaft and, through knowledge of the gearing and the previous position of the rows 50, the position of the rows can be controlled. Use of the word "sensing" is intended to cover any of the various known method of sensing and/or calculating the position of the rows 50.

[0045] The carousel 46 is under the control of a workstation 62, which may be comprised of a personal computer in communication with the database. The workstation 62 receives information from the database regarding items, and quantities for each item, needed to replenish each of the decentralized storage locations 12-1 through 12-n or to fulfill patient dispenses. The workstation 62 processes the information and presents to the user through a screen 64 a series of operations referred to as "picks". The information displayed on the screen may include, for example, an identification of the decentralized storage location, an identification of a cabinet, tower, shelving unit, etc. at the decentralized location, an identification of the patient, the item and quantity to be picked. The workstation 62 also controls a printer 71 which can print barcode labels 72.

[0046] A label 72 with a barcode indicating the item (medication, supply, or kit) and the destination (cabinet, patient, etc.) will be printed from the printer 71. the user will scan that barcode with a scanner to activate the carousel picking process. The carousel dynamically evaluates the work queue of requests (patient dispenses, cabinet refills, on demand picks, stat, now, etc.) based on a configured set of priorities, set by the user. These priorities allow a medical facility to configure the order in which the different requests will be processed. Additionally, the facility may set up different priority ordering for different time periods in the day. For example, first doses may be disabled or prioritized lower during the hours of a cart fill. This work queue can also be paused at any time to perform an on-demand pick or restock. That allows user to pick an urgent item that may be in the queue.

[0047] To enable a pick to be performed, the workstation 62 activates motor 56 to bring the row 50 having the desired item into a pick position. In FIG. 5, the row 50' is illustrated in the pick position. When in the pick position, a plurality of indicia 66 are adjacent to each of the bins 48 in the row 50' in the pick position. The indicia

may include, for example, LEDs or an alphanumeric display. The location could also be indicated on an LCD Display or workstation 62. The workstation 62 may cause a number of LEDs equal to the quantity of items to be picked and adjacent to the bin 48 having the items to be picked to illuminate. Alternatively, an alphanumeric screen could be lit with the quantity of items to be picked from the adjacent bin 48. That is sometimes referred to as “pick-to-light” technology.

[0048] To finish the pick, a hand-held wireless device 68 is used to scan the bin label or item barcode 55. If the quantity that was picked from the device was not the full requested amount (because of an out of stock or expiration condition), the user can adjust the quantity picked and record a reason for the discrepancy before completing the pick. The barcode 72 that is printed at the beginning of the process (which initiates the picking) and the barcode on the bin or item that is scanned to complete the process are different formats to require the user to scan each of these barcodes (if the same information was encoded in each barcode, the user could scan one of the barcodes twice and would lose a critical validation to prevent picking of the incorrect item). An alternative method of indicating the completion of the pick could be to push a button or any other physical manifestation intended to represent the completion of the pick. The user then moves to the workstation 62 and initiates the next pick.

[0049] According to the present invention, when a pick is displayed on the workstation 62, the pick can be initiated either on the workstation 62 or via the hand-held device 68. Once the pick is processed, the hand-held device 68 may be used or a barcode on the centralized storage location may be scanned to indicate that the pick is complete and to initiate the next pick without having to travel to the workstation 62. In a large centralized storage location having numerous carousels 46 under the control of a single workstation 62, the ability to complete a pick and initiate the next pick using the hand-held device 68 eliminates travel time to and from the workstation.

[0050] To increase picking efficiency, a “place-to-light” system, described below in conjunction with FIGs. 5A and 5B, can be used which will allow multiple pick requests to be processed at one time. The system would print out multiple barcodes to begin processing of a batch of items. The user would located these

barcodes in identified locations, indicated by lights. The system would take the most efficient (shortest) path through the bins to pick items for the batch of requests. That allows more efficient movements of the carousel and, if several pick requests require the same item, the device can stop on that item's bin once and allow the picking for each item in the batch.

[0051] Another way to increase efficiency is to implement advance queue processing for a medical facility that has multiple carousels. In FIG. 6, the carousel workstation 119 controls N number of carousels (two shown as 120 and 121, but there could be any number of carousels). The carousel system picks the highest priority item from the queue and prints a barcode label 122. The user scans the barcode and the appropriate carousel (based on current processing and the inventory stocked in the carousel) will move to the correct location. For example, carousel 120 will move row 123 into the pick position. The carousel system will automatically evaluate the queue and the carousels' status. If there is an idle carousel and the next item on the queue is located in that carousel, a label 124 will be printed and the carousel 121 will begin moving the rows to bring the correct row 125 into the pick position. This allows the carousel 121 to bring row 125 into place while the user is picking an item from row 123 from carousel 120.

[0052] One of the features of the present invention is the carousel's 46 ability to be controlled in a manner so that a plurality of picks for more than one order can be processed. Referring to FIG. 7, a portion of the drive track 52 is schematically illustrated. Assume that the line 70 is representative of the pick position and each of the x's on the track 52 is representative of a row of bins. Assume further that three orders are being processed, one order each for patients (or decentralized storage locations) A, B and C and that three picks are needed for each. A-1 is representative of the first pick for A and it is seen that the row containing the first item to be picked for A is in the pick position 70. Moving counterclockwise around track 52, we see that the first pick B-1 for B is next, the first pick C-1 for C is next, followed by the second pick B-2 for B, etc. According to the prior art, picks for a patient/location would normally be queued and presented serially. Thus, after the pick A-1 is completed, the track 52 would be driven so that the pick A-2 could be performed,

followed by the pick A-3. After the picks for A were completed, the row for pick A-3 would be in the pick position. Accordingly, it would be necessary to drive the row containing the pick B-1 into the pick position 70. Thereafter, the rows would be driven so that picks B-2 and B-3 could be performed. The three picks for C would then be serially performed.

[0053] According to the present invention, the picks for A, B and C may be integrated so as to minimize the time between picks. For example, referring to FIGs. 5A and 5B, two examples of an order assembly table 73 are illustrated. Each order assembly table has a plurality of locations 74, 75 and 76 which may be assigned to A, B, and C, respectively. Referring now to FIG 6, the pick A-1 is completed and placed, through the use of light 74a indicating the location to be placed, in position 74. Thereafter, the pick B-1 is completed and placed in position 75 with the aid of light 75b, followed by the pick C-1, which is placed in 76 with the aid of light 76c. Then the pick B-2 is performed, which is placed in position 75, followed by the pick A-2, which is placed in position 74. The next two picks, C-2 and C-3, are placed in position 76, followed by pick A-3, which is placed in position 74, and pick B-3, which is placed in position 75, all with the aid of lights 74a, 75b, and 76c. Thus, by integrating picks, either on a patient basis, cabinet basis, shelving unit basis, or the like, the amount of travel experienced by the rows 50 of bins 48 is minimized, as is the time between picks. Information about the picks can be provided on the handheld device 68, computer screen 64, and/or via the indicia 66, so that the user is provided with information regarding the item, quantity, and order to which the pick belongs.

[0054] FIG. 8 is flow chart illustrating the steps carried out by the workstation 62 for controlling the carousel 46. Beginning at step 100, a mode status is retrieved and queried at step 101. If the auto mode status is off, process flow continues with a check for "demand picks" at steps 102 and 103. If there are no demand picks, process flow returns to step 100. If there are demand picks, process flow proceeds to step 104 where a message is sent to move the carousel to the next bin. If the request is not complete as shown by step 105, another message is sent to move the carousel to the

next bin, which continues until the request is complete, at which time process flow returns to step 100.

[0055] If at step 101 the auto mode is on, fill priorities are retrieved at step 106, and the next fill request is retrieved at step 107. A decision step 108 verifies that there are items to access. If there are no items to access, process flow returns to step 100.

[0056] If there are items to access, step 109 identifies if any are not in the carousel. Step 110 is a decision step that determines if there are any non-carousel items on the list and, if not, process flow proceeds with step 111 to identify the carousel printer 71. If there are non-carousel items on the list, the non-carousel item printer is identified at step 112, a barcode label is printed at step 113, and a decision step 114 determines if all items are non-carousel. If the answer at decision step 114 is “yes”, process flow returns to step 100; if “no” process flow proceeds to step 111.

[0057] From step 111, process flow continues with step 115 in which a barcode label is printed. At step 116, the process pauses to wait for a label scan message indicating that the user has scanned the printed barcode label. At step 117 the most efficient path is determined. Process flow continues with step 104.

[0058] Carousels which may be modified to provide the functionality of the carousel 46 are available from a number of manufacturers such as White and Remstar. Exemplary hardware specifications are found in Table 1.

Table No. 1 – Hardware Specifications	
<i>Remstar Model 180S-18-15 or equivalent</i>	
Carrier Capacity (lbs.)	485
Total Unit Capacity (lbs.)	13,448
Number of Carriers	18
Number of Intermediate Shelves	18
Pitch (inches)	15
Height (feet)	13’6”
Max Imbalance Load (lbs)	1,540
Depth of carrier (inches)	15.0

Max. Rotation Speed (inches/secs.)	5.9
Width of unit (inches)	115.6
Depth of Unit (inches)	46.5
Power Supply	208/220V 3 ~/60Hz
<i>Pick-to-Light Technology</i> Remstar Controller T-88 15 Amp service 480 Volts 1 posting board Beacon lights on shelf	

[0059] As seen from Table 1, carousels may easily be 10 feet or more in width. Because the carousel must be designed based on the heaviest item to be dispensed, the carousel may be considerably over -designed for many of the items to be carried. According to another aspect of the present invention, a carousel 88 may have a “slot-machine” design as shown in FIG. 9. The carousel 88 of FIG. 9 has a plurality of tracks 52, each having its own electric motor 56 and drive gears (not shown). Each of the drive tracks 52 has connected to it its own plurality of bins arranged in a plurality of rows 50. In that way, the carousel 88 may be designed in a number of discreet columns with one of the columns designed for dispensing heavier items, and the other columns designed for dispensing lighter items. The column dispensing the lighter items need not be engineered to carry the same amount of weight as the column designed to carry the heavier items, and therefore can be made more inexpensively. Additionally, because it is to dispense lighter items, a smaller motor may be used as well as different gearing. Another advantage of the “slot-machine” concept is the need for varying speeds in the automation. The fast moving items will be stored in the fast moving tracks and the heavier and bulkier items in a slower moving track. The multiple rotating columns could minimize wait times for the operator by indexing to the next pick location in the columns where the operator is not currently picking.

[0060] Although the present invention has been described in conjunction with a vertical carousel, the concepts of the present invention could be implemented using a horizontal type of carousel.

[0061] Other types of hardware which may be used at the centralized storage location 10 include a system of the type disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,593,267 entitled "Automated System for Selecting and Delivering Packages from a Storage Area," U.S. Patent No. 5,880,443 entitled "Automated System for Selecting Packages from a Cylindrical Storage Area," and U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 09/480,819 entitled "An Automated Medication Dispensing System," all of which are hereby incorporated by reference. It is anticipated that the centralized location may be comprised of various types of hardware such as carousels illustrated in FIG. 5 and FIG. 9, and/or the hardware identified in the aforementioned patents and pending application. The centralized storage location may be completely automated, partially automated by having both a carousel and, for example, a computer-controlled robot, or completely manual by having one or more carousels. In that manner, a manual restocking system based on a carousel can be used side-by-side with an automated restocking system based on a robot.

[0062] FIG. 10 illustrates the computers used at various locations within a dispensing/restocking system of the type disclosed herein. As seen in FIG. 10, decentralized storage location 12-1 is where control computer 32 (if supplied) is located. Decentralized storage location 12-n is where interface computer 38 (if supplied) is located. The carousel work station 62 is located at the centralized storage location 10. The centralized storage location 10 may also have a Robot-Rx support station 89 which is used to control a robot.

[0063] A computer 90, which may be located at centralized storage location 10 or may be located elsewhere, maintains the database for the system. The computer 90 receives information from the decentralized storage locations 12-1 through 12-n and provides information to the carousel work station 62 and/or the Robot-Rx support station 89 to enable restocking packages 96 to be prepared. Additionally, dispenses to patients, distributions to satellite facilities, and the like may occur from centralized location 10. An interface PC 92 may be provided to enable external systems, such as a PC 94 on which a hospital information system resides, to communicate with the computer 90 on which the database is located. Completing the description of FIG. 10, as has been previously described, restocking packages 96 are prepared at the

centralized storage location 10 and delivered to the decentralized storage locations 12-1 through 12-n.

[0064] The carousels 46, 88 of the present invention support cycle counts to verify inventory. The carousel system is semi-manual, so maintaining accurate inventory is very important to the operation of the system. To ensure accurate inventory levels, the carousel system supports various cycle count options which allow a user with the correct security privileges to periodically perform a physical count of the items in a bin. This process allows users to count controlled substances (based on DEA code) or other identified items (for example, high-cost or high-usage items) on one schedule (for example, daily or weekly) and then the remaining items on a different schedule (for example, monthly). In operation, the carousel will automatically move the shelves to the next bin that needs to be counted, the user will count the inventory and input the current inventory count into the workstation, and if a discrepancy exists, it will be logged with the user information and a reason. Once the count is completed, the carousel system will record the bin as counted with the current date and time and move to the next bin to be counted. The next bin will then be moved to and counted. The recently counted bins can be manually counted at any time, but will not show up in the automatic cycle count process until the next scheduled time. Such inventory counts help prevent out of stocks, help identify expirations, and provide better management of inventory

[0065] Where centralized storage location 10 is used to restock decentralized locations 12-1 through 12-n having AcuDose-Rx™ cabinets, the restocking process may be initiated in an automated manner. The ability to track inventory levels on the AcuDose-Rx™ cabinets enables the database computer 90 to indicate when par levels are low and will trigger a flag for the restock to occur, as opposed to restock happening at periodic times or other methods not based on actual levels. Furthermore, the loop can be closed on the restocking process for AcuDose-Rx™ cabinets through the verification of the restocked orders at the cabinet. For example the carousel 46, 88 will process the restock orders for the AcuDose-Rx™ cabinet, and after the order is filled and delivered to the cabinet on the floor, the labels will be scanned at the cabinet to verify that the indicated amount on the restock report is

actually loaded into the cabinet. This is especially useful for narcotics and other expensive or controlled medications. If the expected quantity to be restocked was not actually restocked at the cabinet, a discrepancy can be created and reported on or a notification can be displayed to the central location.

[0066] A system of the type illustrated in FIG. 1 implemented with the hardware of FIGS. 3, 4 and 5, and 9 may be provided with the following functionality.

- [0067]** • Multiple and configurable fill times for batch fills. Each nursing unit can be configured with custom fill times, which will cause the carousel work station 62 and/or Robot-Rx™ support station 89 to fill orders only within the configured time period. Additionally, each nursing unit can be configured with more than one fill time to support centralized storage locations that do just-in-time or multiple fills per day.
- [0068]** • Batch fills process off of delivery units, which are logical groupings of nursing units in the facility. This allows centralized storage locations to fill several nursing units at one time as part of a cart exchange (for example, all nursing units on the second floor).
- [0069]** • Real-time admission, discharge and transfer (ADT) and order change processing during filling and a corresponding pre-delivery check. Any patient admission, discharge, or transfer or order discontinuing or changing a quantity will be processed during the fill processing. That prevents incorrect orders from being delivered and prevents patient medications from being delivered to the wrong room.
- [0070]** • Track the delivery times for patients or decentralized locations that are filled by the carousel. That is important when filling patient orders, because knowing whether something made a cart fill or not would give the system the ability to know whether a first dose needs to be sent up to the patient to fulfill an order or whether it can be served by the cart exchange. Knowing when the delivery occurs lets you know whether an order change is caught by the pre-delivery check and is part of the

delivery. It also gives the system the ability to get billing records correct for a patient.

- [0071]** • Support for dose calculations to fill requests when a specific dose is not present. For example, one Tylenol 500 MG table may be ordered, but may be filled by picking two 250 MG tablets.
- [0072]** • Support for medication kits. Orders for medication kits are for multiple items stored in the carousel. For example, a kit might consist of medication A, medication B, and the IV tubing necessary to deliver the medication. The system can associate one medication order to all three of these line items and dispense them and bill for them all as one item.
- [0073]** • Different checking options exist to support different state regulations. Supported options include checking all orders, checking no orders, checking manually picked orders, and random checking of patients.
- [0074]** • The carousel will implement two methods of restocking items that are low on inventory. One will be a static method, where the hospital configures a maximum and par level for each item in the carousel. Once the inventory falls below the par level, the item will be requested as a restock. The second method is to configure a maximum level, but to dynamically calculate the hospital's daily usage of an item based on historical data. This allows a moving average as item usage changes (changes in formulary or purchasing patterns, seasonal variations, etc.).
- [0075]** • The events and transactions generated from the carousel and other automated systems will be moved to a separate long-term storage system. This system will record the dispense, inventory count, restock, and configuration (assignment and de-assignment) actions taken against the carousel, including, but not limited to, the following information: date and time, station, user, medication, and quantity. This data archiving system will allow users to periodically record these transactions to a recordable CD (CD-R). Because the carousel can store controlled substances, the recording of activity against these

medications is required by law. Additionally, this storage system can provide long-term data analysis such as medication usage, processing efficiencies, and user actions.

- [0076]** • Dispensing logic between pharmacy automation devices and unit-based cabinets. This logic helps prevent medications that could be dispensed from more than one system (pharmacy automation systems such as the ROBOT-Rx device or carousel, and unit based cabinets such as AcuDose-Rx cabinet) from being dispensed to a patient from multiple systems. A potential medication error is to, for example, allow a user to dispense a medication from a cabinet, and then have the same medication for the same order be delivered to the patient room from a cart fill or first dose fill from the pharmacy. The systems will evaluate whether the medication can be filled by a unit-based cabinet and/or a pharmacy automation product and decide, based on configurations, to which device to send the medication fill request. This functionality allows configuration on a unit or medication level, and allows configuration based on order types (PRN, scheduled, etc.) and DEA codes (controlled substances).
- [0077]** • Configurable fill priorities which automatically sends certain orders to a configured automation device based on priorities and status of the restocking devices. Fill priorities can include, but are not limited to, filling new medication orders, stat medication orders, decentralized inventories, etc.
- [0078]** • Track the lot numbers for all medications or supplies stocked into the carousel. As a result, if a recall occurs, the system can know whether that lot number was ever in the carousel and to whom the medications or supply was dispensed.
- [0079]** • Allow operators to process credits and returns of medications/supplies. Medications and supplies are often not used because a patient is discharged, orders are cancelled, or other reasons. As a result, it is important for the system to process these returns by crediting the

patient's account for the returned medication/supply, returning it to stock, and then updating the carousel inventory.

- [0080] • The carousel will provide optimization processes which will identify, based on historical drug usage information, the optimal bin placement for the item. For example, the highest use items will be located on the same shelves to minimize travel distance between picks. Additionally, queue and pick processing will evaluate the optimal path to traverse. Inventory logic tracks the utilization rates of all medication in the carousel and generates reports which indicate which items might not be used frequently enough to take up space in the carousel as well as those items which receive a sufficient volume of orders to warrant being added to the carousel. These reports indicate high volume, non-automated items and low volume, automated items.
- [0081] • Items that could not be picked from the centralized storage device (because of an out of stock condition or because the item is not stored in the device) will be directed to a manual pick process. The manual pick process allows a pick report (exception list) to be displayed and printed, which displays an list of medications or supplies and the total quantity needed for the manual pick batch and displays a report for each patient identifying each item and the quantity required. The manual pick list displays patient information, including name, ID, location, and facility, along with order information such as the order description, route, frequency, dosage, and special instructions. Sites may configure to display the configured system drug name or the drug description passed with the order from the Pharmacy Information System. Additionally, the manual pick items may be directed to a label printer to generate a series of labels, one for each manual pick item.
- [0082] • Dispensing software which prints out a barcode (or other form of identification) to serve as a "license plate" for the dispensing package from the carousel. This license plate can be used to close the loop on the delivery of the package to its final destination, such as a

computerized medication cabinet. As a result, if there is a diversion of medications or supplies and they don't make it to their intended destination, a discrepancy can be denoted, particularly if the ultimate delivery location is an AcuDose-Rx cabinet which is on the Connect-Rx platform with the carousel.

- [0083] • The carousel may send pick requests to an automated, controlled substance vault. Some controlled substances may not be able to be stocked in the carousel. However, the carousel control software could send a request to open the door to a controlled substance vault, like the narcotics vault, and lead the operator to pick a medication from this vault if it was required to compete a restock package or dispense.

[0084] The restocking packages 96 may take a variety of forms. The restocking packages 96 may also be patient specific or room specific. In one embodiment, the user delivers the patient or room specific restocking package to the decentralized storage location 12-1 through 12-n and is directed to load the medications into a patient/room specific area. In other embodiments, the restocking package is inserted into or connected into the unit's hardware. Dispenses are then made under the control of the control computer 32. Advantages of this approach include:

- Development of a "nursing focused" medication administration dispensing system
- Dispensing patient specific medications
- Dispensing time specific medications
- Nursing unit specific
- Fixed or mobile
- Bar code driven

[0085] In the various embodiments of the patient specific/room specific process medications are stocked in a robot system or a carousel system. A pharmacy information system (PIS) sends a fill list to the database computer 90, which sends instructions to either the carousel workstation 62 or the robot support station 89;

medications are picked from the carousel or picked automatically by the robot, respectively. From that point on, the process is patient or room specific.

[0086] In a first embodiment of the patient specific/room specific process:

- The picked medications are delivered into patient specific containers (envelope or bin) and may or may not be arranged in a time specific order.
- The container is loaded onto a mobile cart which is identified for a particular decentralized storage location (statically or dynamically). The mobile cart includes an on-board chip that carries the cart's ID. Information about the medications currently stocked in the cart is also maintained by the on-board chip.
- The cart is delivered to the decentralized location.
- The cart is electronically connected to the control computer 32 (FIG. 3). Once connected, the control computer recognizes the mobile cart's ID.
- Items are dispensed from the cart under the control of control computer 32. The mobile cart may include a visual indication to aid in the placement or retrieval of items.
- As items are dispensed from the mobile cart, information maintained by the on-board chip is modified accordingly.
- Bar coded envelope and/or medications may be scanned at the decentralized storage location for verification.
- When replenishment becomes necessary, the mobile cart may be returned to the central pharmacy and connected to the carousel or Robot-Rx robot at which time the information on the chip may be accessed
- Once connected, the carousel or robot identifies the system and may automatically perform a refill for the mobile cart.

[0087] In a second embodiment of the patient specific/room specific process:

- Picked medications are delivered into patient specific containers (envelope) and may or may not be arranged in a time specific order.

- The envelopes are loaded into a tote, see FIG. 11, which may include an on-board chip.
- The tote is delivered to a decentralized location (with a tower) and identified at the control computer 32.
- The tote is inserted into the tower or cabinet.
- Items are dispensed from the tower under the control of the control computer 32.
- Bar coded envelope and/or medications may be scanned at the decentralized storage location for verification.

[0088] In a third embodiment of the patient specific/room specific process:

- Picked items are delivered into a patient specific container, and may or may not be arranged in a time specific order.
- Specific locations within the cabinet or auxiliary cabinet are designated as “patient specific pockets” and are lock-lidded.
- The user scans the container at the decentralized storage location.
- The control computer 32 recognizes the patient specific items and identifies the pocket into which the items are to be loaded.
- Items are then dispensed from the cabinet or auxiliary cabinet under the control of computer 32.
- Bar coded envelope and/or medications may be scanned at the decentralized storage location for verification.

[0089] While the present invention has been described in connection with exemplary embodiments thereof, those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that many modifications and variations are possible. Accordingly, the scope of the present invention is intended to be limited only by the following claims and to any equivalents thereof.